▼▼▼CHAPTER 12

Visual Arts and Crafts

Only in the last twenty years or so has the work of African-American artists begun to get the recognition it deserves. While preparing this book, the authors looked at many books about South Carolina and Southern artists. Almost without exception, books written before 1970 ignored the work of African-American artists. However, even if they were ignored, African-Americans have been painting, photographing, and engaging in many other forms of art for a long time. African-Americans created out of their own experience, showing us the joys and the sorrows of their lives.

In one short chapter, we can only show a few examples of their work. We only have space to mention a few of the many talented artists. If you take the time to look beyond this book, you will find many other paintings and photographs of these and other artists on display at museums around the country.

First, in order to make a comparison, we will briefly look at how white artists painted African-Americans. Then we will see how African-Americans developed as artists in the 1900s. We shall see how their work built pride and challenged white views.

African-American Life through White Eyes

In the 1800s, most white artists ignored African-Americans. The white artists who did paint pictures with African-American subjects usually trivialized African-American culture. They tended to show it in an oversimplified way. For example, William Aiken Walker (1838-1921) was the only South Carolina artist of his day who specialized in pictures of African-Americans. On the positive side, his work does show everyday life. African-Americans had no chance to paint pictures depicting their lives in those days. So Walker's work is a valuable record of everyday life for African-Americans. Walker painted people picking cotton and working in the fields. We can see that life was not easy for African-Americans in the years after the Civil War. On the negative side, Walker used "caricature" in some of his work. A caricature is a picture that exaggerates and distorts. His pictures also leave out anything beyond daily working life. The characters do not show any of the deep feelings that they certainly had. Therefore we cannot conclude that he wanted to show a sympathetic or complete picture of African-American life. Whatever his shortfalls, Walker left us a record of the struggle for daily survival faced by African-Americans in the late 1800s.

Later, African-Americans were able to tell their own story. They told a much more complete story. They showed complex people with much deeper feelings. Good art does that. It allows the viewer to see into the hearts of the subject being shown. It allows us to feel what the artist saw in her subject. We shall now turn to that deeper and more complete story.

The Flowering of African-American Art in the 1900s

During the period of segregation, talented African-Americans had to leave the South for their artistic training. While some returned, many did not. More people in the North supported African-American artists. A black middle class had come into being. Whites who had been part of the abolitionist movement lived in the North. Both of these groups helped and supported African-American artists in the years after the Civil War. Some Southern-born artists, like Henry Tanner, found support overseas. They lived and worked outside the United States. At first, African-American artists used limited subject matter

in their work. Many talented artists who had grown up in the South, such as Edward Bannister and Henry Tanner, painted the same kinds of pictures as did whites. We must realize that most African-American artists in the 1800s were trying to make a living in a world controlled by whites. Therefore, they focused on the subjects of most concern to a white audience. Those who were more open to new ideas in their work were mainly the younger artists.

By the 1920s, African-American artists were painting African-Americans. During this period a number of African-American communities began to sponsor African-American art exhibits in their cities. African-American artists had a chance to show their work. Several national programs began to give them awards. As early as 1914, Joel Spingarn, the chairman of the NAACP, sponsored the award of a gold medal to an African-American for achievement in any field. Ten years later, his wife Amy added another award just for literature and art. South Carolina artist Edwin A. Harleston was one of the first winners.

In 1922, William E. Harmon, a white businessman, created the Harmon Foundation. By 1926, the Foundation added separate awards to recognize the achievements of African-Americans. Visual arts (painting, photography, and sculpture) was one of eight fields where they awarded gold medals and prizes. The foundation gave awards through 1933. The first year, nineteen artists submitted their work. The second year, the number was forty. Within ten years, the number of participating artists tripled.

The Harmon Foundation was not the first group to recognize the work of African-Americans. But it was the most influential. Its support helped a number of African-Americans become established in their chosen fields. By the late 1920s, an award from the Harmon Foundation was the greatest recognition an African-American artist could achieve. Later in the 1930s, the Harmon Foundation sponsored a number of exhibits by African-Americans. This was the time of the Great Depression when few people had money for such "luxuries" as art.

The Harlem Renaissance and Its Impact

The African-American community had two conflicting ideas about the best way to improve their lives. On one side was Booker T. Washington. He believed that African-Americans should work on getting better jobs and living conditions. If treated equally by the law and given a chance, African-Americans would show white society what they could do. He viewed racism as something with which African-Americans would just have to live. Many Southerners accepted this approach in the early years of the 1900s. On the other side was W.E.B. DuBois. He believed in confronting racism. DuBois felt that African-Americans should demand both social and economic equality. He believed continual struggle for equality was important. His philosophy became more popular among African-Americans as they served in World War I.

After World War I, this new awareness and pride helped produce a great deal of new literature and art by African-Americans. DuBois had been involved in the founding of the NAACP. He became editor of its journal, *The Crisis,* at the beginning of the 1920s. The magazine and the organization both operated out of New York City. Jobs and a better life had attracted many African-Americans, including many South Carolinians, to the city. By 1930, about ten percent of all the African-Americans in the city were from South Carolina. Harlem alone had over 150,000 African-American residents. Here, African-American culture could be expressed freely and openly. Although bigotry still existed, creative activity could flourish.

This flourishing of creative activity in the 1920s by African-Americans has been called a "Renaissance," which means rebirth. This is somewhat misleading because black creativity had never really died. Rather, it had been covered up. In any case, Harlem became the center of a great deal of literary and artistic creativity. James Weldon Johnson published his book *God's Trombones* in 1927. Other prominent writers were Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay. The support of the Harmon Foundation enabled artists to concentrate on their painting and sculpture.

Interest in the Harlem Renaissance was so great that a well-known magazine, *The Survey Graphic,* decided to devote a whole issue to it. They asked Dr. Alain Locke of Howard University, who had been the first African-American Rhodes Scholar, to do the editing. In 1925, Professor Locke published *The New*

Negro, a collection of stories and poetry focusing on African-American culture. Locke believed that African art had been unjustly ignored. His efforts to gain recognition of its beauty and artistic worth brought a new pride to African-Americans. As a result, many African-American artists created "protest" art. This was often more realistic than mainstream white painting.

The Great Depression slowed the growth of African-American art. However, some progress continued. African-American artists working during this period focused on their culture and pride. Some of them received funding from the Works Progress Administration of the U.S. Government. This help was critical for the folk artists from the South, most of whom had no formal training. Without this help, these people usually could not show their work in museums and galleries.

In the years after World War II, African-American artists continued to focus on their own experiences. They gradually found a place in mainstream America. Some African-American artists portrayed the experiences of African-Americans who had moved from the South, where there was no chance in life, to the harsh urban ghettos. In the 1960s as the civil rights movement gained steam, African-American art showed the strong feelings of the time. AfriCobra, or the African Community of Bad Relevant Artists, was a militant group of black artists. They wanted to build a positive self image for the black community.

Many African-American artists did "abstract" work. Abstract means work that focuses on lines, colors and shapes, instead of just making a photo-like picture of reality. African-American museums were established. African-American art exhibits became more common. By the 1980s, several African-American museums had been established in major cities. Mainstream museums were beginning to recognize the work of African-American artists.

Impact in South Carolina

At the same time that the Harlem Renaissance was taking place in New York, similar cultural explosions were taking place in other cities. This was true for Southern cities as well as Northern ones. Entire streets or districts became African-American cultural centers. Even white writers explored African-American culture in books and plays. For example, DuBose Heyward of Charleston wrote the world famous play "Porgy," with Catfish Row in Charleston as its setting. Later, this became the basis for the musical about African-American life, "Porgy and Bess." A whole new generation of African-Americans were creating art in South Carolina. These included the Harlestons in Charleston and Richard Roberts in Columbia. So much was going on in Charleston that it is sometimes called the "Charleston Renaissance." As DuBois put it, African-Americans were seeing "beauty in black" through their own efforts.

African-American Art through African-American Eyes

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, South Carolina's African-American artists began to come into their own. In the next few pages, we shall introduce you to some of these people and their work. They present a much more complex picture of African-American life than we see through the eyes of white artists.

One of the earliest South Carolina photographers was Arthur MacBeth. MacBeth is not as well-known as the later photographer Richard Roberts. Nevertheless, his work served as a model for the photographers of his day. It showed that photography is art. Born in Charleston in 1864 and educated at the Avery Institute, he was a businessman and an award winning photographer. His early photographs were taken at the Laing School near Charleston. In 1886, he opened his first photography studio in Charleston. Portraits were very popular at that time. He concentrated on portrait work to support himself, first in Charleston and then in Baltimore and Norfolk. Apparently, he operated two studios in different cities at the same time after leaving South Carolina.

MacBeth was more fortunate than many in that he saw his work recognized while he was alive. He received awards from the South Carolina Fair, the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, and the Jamestown Tricentennial Exposition. In 1902, he managed the Negro Building at the S.C. Interstate and West Indian Exposition in Charleston, where the work of African-American artists was displayed. MacBeth also invented the "MacBeth Daylight Projecting Machine."

A 1900 Arthur MacBeth photo of children going to school. Silver gelatin print. Reproduced with permission of the South Caroliniana Library. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.

It allowed motion pictures to be shown in the daytime. He showed future generations of African-Americans that it was possible to make a living at ones art. This was no small accomplishment.

Richard Samuel Roberts is typical of many African-Americans whose work was not recognized in his own time. He was a self-taught photographer. In 1920, he moved from Florida to Columbia, where his wife had relatives because the climate was better for his wife's health. Within two years, he had established a photography business. He supported his family by working as a custodian from four in the morning to twelve noon every day. He spent his afternoons engaging in his true vocation. Over the years, he took thousands of pictures of Columbia's African-American citizens, as well as pictures in other parts of the state. Many were published in *The Palmetto Leader,* an African-American newspaper. Amazingly, after he died in 1936, researchers discovered several thousand undeveloped negatives. The negatives had been stored under his house in a crawl space for forty years. The University of South Carolina was interested in preserving the work of talented citizens. This interest led the school's researchers to the Roberts family. The researchers who restored his work could not identify all of the people in the photographs after so many years. Even so, the pictures provide a priceless record of the everyday lives of average people. Many of these have been published in a book about Roberts, *A True Likeness.* A number of examples of his work appear in this and other chapters.

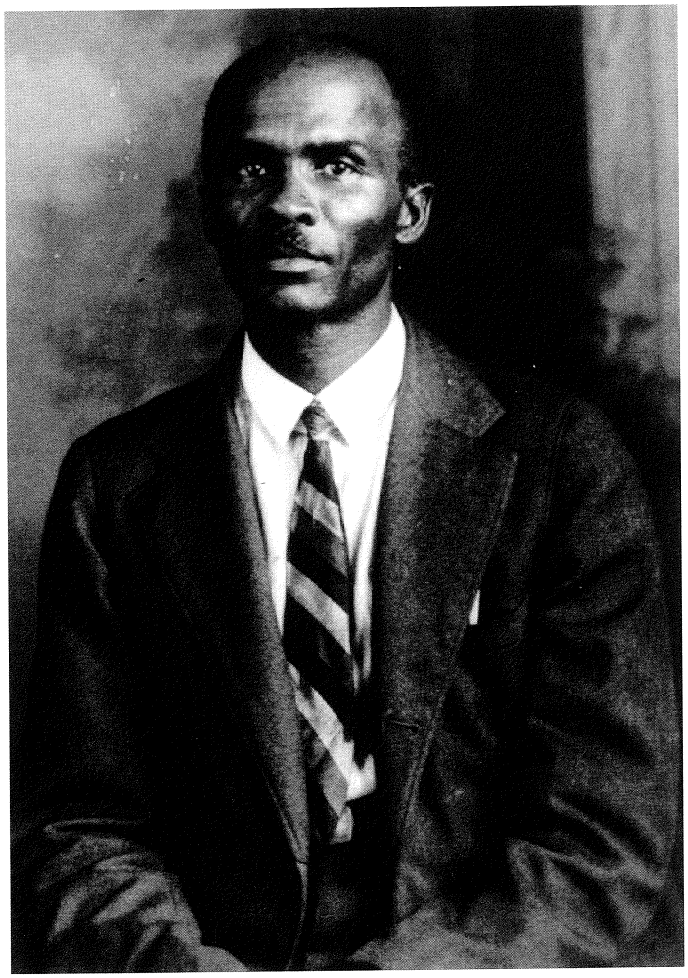
Elise and Edwin Harleston were husband and wife who often worked as a team. Quite frequently,

Edwin would paint portraits from Elise's photographs, as is the case with the picture of the Civil War veteran you saw in the chapter on the Civil War. Edwin did two renderings from her photograph besides his initial sketch, a charcoal drawing and an oil painting. The couple had a studio at their home in Charleston.

Elise Forrest Harleston, born in 1891, studied photography at Tuskegee Institute in 1921. Like most artists, she and her husband had to support themselves by other means. They had a funeral home located next door to their house. Elise minded the office. Because she liked people, she often sat in the driveway and talked to them as they went by. When she met someone who had an interesting face, she asked that person to sit for her and her husband. In this manner she gained many subjects for her pictures. She is known as a portrait photographer, one of the few African-American women artists of a generation when few women were allowed to be creative. She died in 1970.

Edwin Augustus "Teddy" Harleston of Charleston was both an artist and a civil rights leader. He was born in 1882. After attending Avery Institute in Charleston, he went to Atlanta. There he received a degree at Atlanta University. He thought of becoming a doctor and attended Howard University for awhile. Eventually he decided to become an artist. He headed for Boston. Before returning home, he studied art for six years at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School. While in Boston, he supported himself by working as

(Left) Richard Samuel Roberts. Self-portrait of South Carolina's most famous African-American photographer sometime in the mid-1930s before he died in 1936. Courtesy of Roberts family. (Right) "Mary," a 1921 painting by Edwin Augustus Harleston. Oil on linen. Reproduced with permission of Janet Hopkins and Ted Phillips. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.



"Sowing," a 1920s painting by William H. Johnson. Screenprint. Courtesy of Gibbes Museum of Art.

a seaman. Returning to Charleston, he worked in his family's funeral business and became involved in civil rights. He was one of the founders of the Charleston chapter of the NAACP in 1916. Educational equality was one of his areas of particular concern.

Edwin Harleston pursued his artistic bent at the same time. He became known as a portrait artist. His studio was located on the top floor of his house. In the 1920s he had a number of exhibits in the New York area. Some were through the Harmon Foundation, a group you learned about earlier that promoted African-American art. In 1931, the year that he died, he joined the Harmon Foundation. He is one of the best known African-American artists of his generation.

James V. Herring started out as a painter. He painted in the style of the Impressionists, who were interested in light and color. However, he chose to focus on art history. Born in Clio in 1887, he is one of those who left the state to make a career elsewhere. He went to study at Syracuse University in New York State.

When Herring went to Howard University in 1921 with the intention of starting an art department, everyone was skeptical. He later told an interviewer that both faculty and administrators laughed at him. Herring did not let that stop him. Later, he started what may have been the first real African-American art department at an African-American university. His department was one of the centers that provided the same energy found in New York during the Harlem Renaissance. A number of talented people came to work with him at Howard. In 1930, the University Gallery of Art opened under his direction. In his association with the Harmon Foundation, Herring served as a judge for awards given to distinguished African-Americans. He died in 1969.

William Henry Johnson was an artist who has been rediscovered in recent years. He was born in Florence in 1901. As did so many others, he left the

South to further his artistic training. In New York, he attended the Academy of Design while working a variety of unskilled jobs to pay his expenses. In the 1920s, he moved to Europe, first going to Paris on a scholarship. He married a Danish artist sixteen years his senior. For most of the 1920s and 1930s, he remained in Europe. In 1930, he visited the U.S. and finished some paintings for the Harmon Foundation. An arrest for vagrancy while visiting his mother in Florence left him disgusted with discrimination in the United States. He returned to Europe.

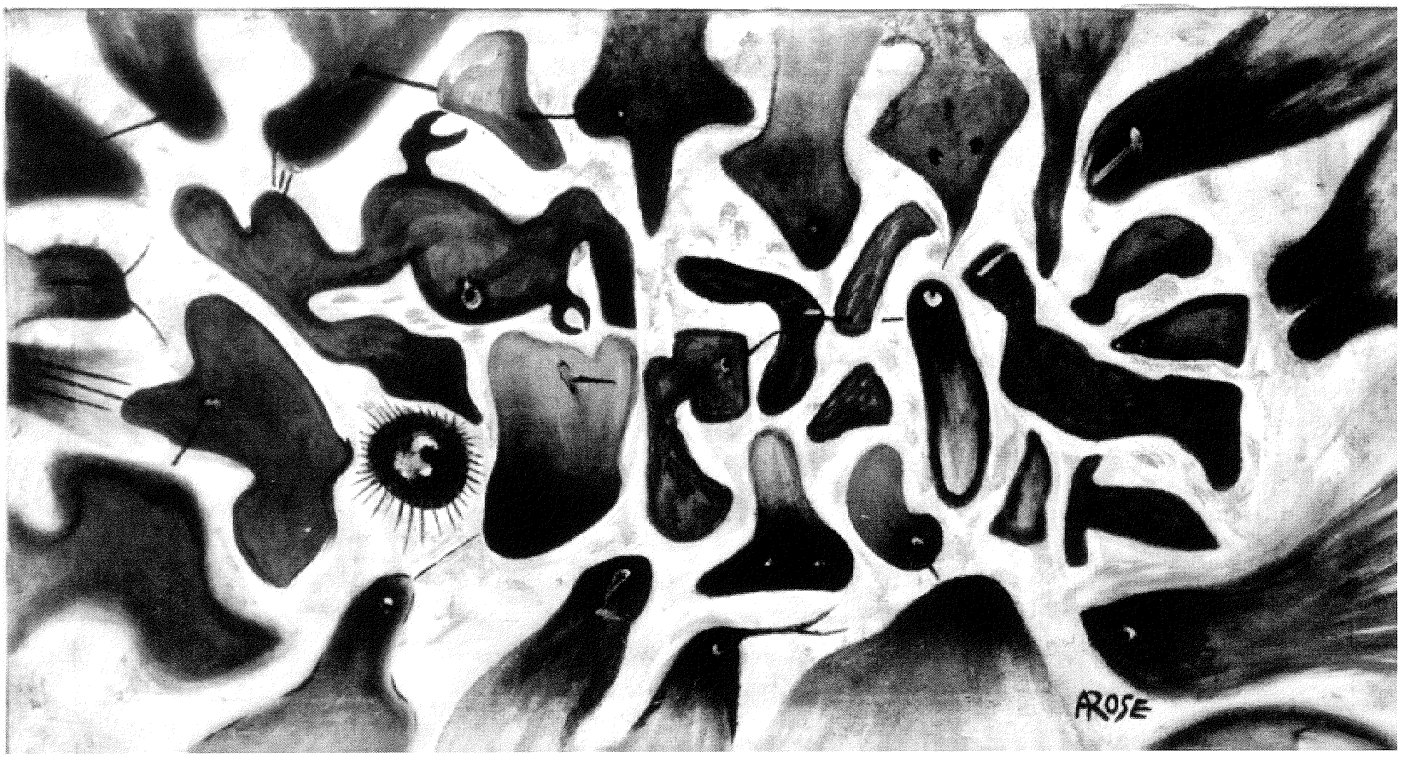
Johnson and his wife moved to New York in 1938 to escape from the Nazis. She died of cancer after World War II. He never recovered from the shock of her death. He moved back to the country of Denmark and became mentally ill. Authorities found him wandering on the streets, carrying his paintings around with him. Sent back to New York in 1947, he spent the rest of his life in a mental institution. Sadly, he never was able to paint another picture and died in 1970.

Although in many ways his life was a tragedy, Johnson is recognized today as a talented artist. During his career, he experimented with a number of different styles of painting. His subjects range from landscapes to life in the African-American South to religion to political figures. In 1966, his work found a home at the Smithsonian in Washington. The National Museum of American Art has a collection of over 1,000 pieces of his work.

South Carolina, like many areas of the South, saw an exodus of talent in the years after the Civil War. In the 1900s, some of those who had left to study came home again. Arthur Rose is typical of those who returned to the South and helped enrich the lives of others. Born in Charleston, Rose became interested in art at the age of six. He received his undergraduate degree from Claflin College. He then left the state to study at New York University, where he earned a master's degree. Returning to South Carolina, he became chairman of the art department at Claflin College. He was responsible for training many other young African-American artists. Rose said that he liked teaching others how to create. He was an important role model to aspiring young African-American artists. Although he began as a painter, Arthur Rose also created metal sculpture. His work was highly praised. From the 1950s on, he had many shows, including five shows at Atlanta University. He received many awards, including one from the National Conference of Artists. He retired in Orangeburg.

Dr. Leo F. Twiggs of St. Stephen was a student of

"Scene in Corsica," a 1920s landscape painting by William H. Johnson. Courtesy of Gibbes Museum of Art.



(Top) "Creatures of the Deep," a 1970s painting by Arthur Rose. Oil on canvas. Reproduced with permission of the artist. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art. (Left) Ezekiel's Wheels, Window Child, a 1990 painting by Dr. Leo Twiggs. Batik reproduced with permission of the artist. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.

Arthur Rose at Claflin College. Like his mentor, he has been an important role model for African-American artists in South Carolina. He graduated summa cum laude from college. For six years, he taught art at the high school level. Continuing his education, he received a master's degree from New York University in 1964 and a Ph.D. from the University of Georgia in 1970. He is the director of the I. P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium at S.C. State University. His work in teaching art to disadvantaged African-American students and his other activities have earned him many awards. He has served on a number of boards and commissions, including the South Carolina State Museum and the South Carolina Arts Commission. His work in a number of different media, including oil, acrylic, and batik, has been widely exhibited. Many collections include his paintings. He continues to be a major influence on many young artists in South Carolina.

Folk artist Samuel Doyle was born in 1906. He grew up on St. Helena Island and studied at the Penn School. He supported himself by working as a por-

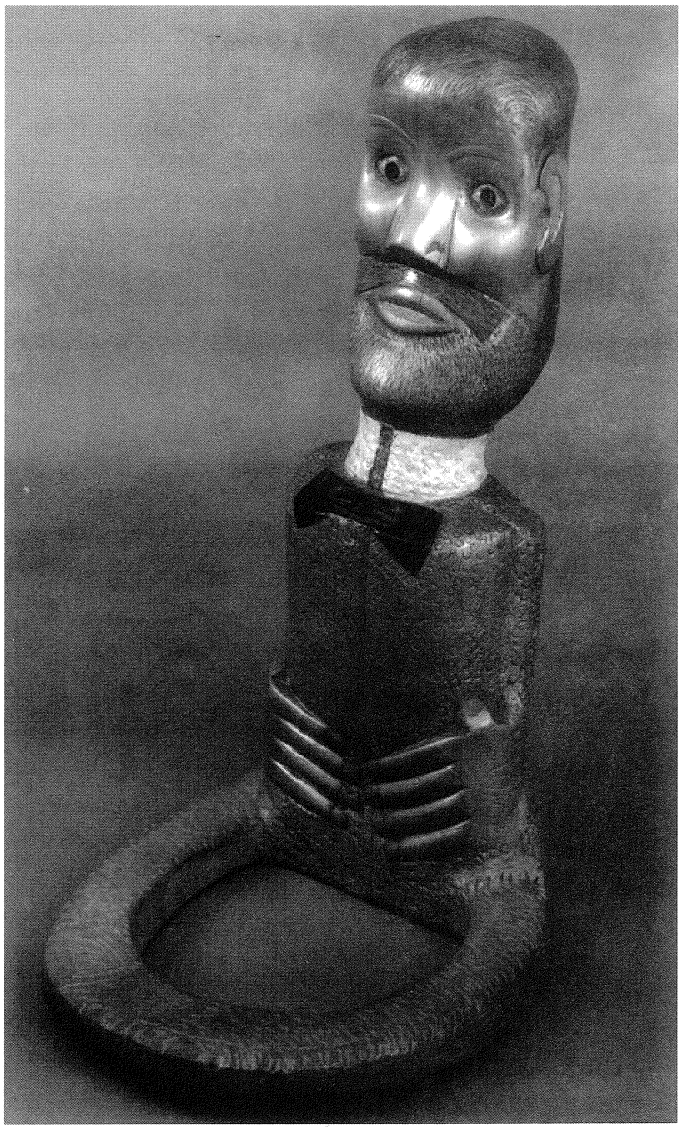
ter, a clerk, and a laundry attendant. A self-taught artist, he used anything he could find as his materials including plywood, tin, and house paint. Doyle displayed his work in his front yard. A wide variety of subjects attracted his interest including people, historical events, and scenes from the *Bible.* You can see an example of his work, "Lincoln in Frogmore," in the Civil War chapter earlier in the book. Doyle died in 1985.

James Hampton was born in Elloree in 1909 and passed away in 1964. Another emigre from the state, he moved to Washington, D.C. around 1928. He served in the army, then supported himself by working as a cook and a janitor. Hampton was also self-taught, but his work was quite different from Doyle's. It has a religious theme. His major work is called *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millenium General Assembly.* He worked on it every night for a number of years. It was created from a variety of objects, such as light bulbs, wooden furniture, and bottles covered with foil. A religious vision inspired him to create this unique work. It may have been inspired by Kongo grave decorations, where reflective surfaces sometimes represent water. You will recall that in the beliefs of some African cultures, water connects the two worlds of the living and the dead.

Merton D. Simpson, born in Charleston in 1928, left the state to study at Cooper Union and New York University. In the early 1950s, he apprenticed as a framemaker. This gave him the opportunity to meet many important artists coming by to pick up their frames. The artists offered constructive criticism of his work, described as "semi-abstract." Simpson settled in New York where he paints and also owns an art gallery. He is known for his "confrontation" series of paintings. The South Carolina Arts Commission purchased "Confrontation #20," an abstract expressionist piece. In 1964 during the Harlem, N.Y. riots, Simpson witnessed a confrontation between police and African-Americans. Several weeks later he began a series of twenty-two mostly abstract paintings. The paintings are his interpretation of racial unrest in Harlem.

Mac Arthur Goodwin, an art educator who has lived in Columbia and Spartanburg, has worked in a variety of media. He trained as a painter but became interested in drawing and printmaking. A critic has described his work as seeming to give the appearance of a dream world. A museum curator described it as presenting a romantic image of Africa. As an educator Goodwin works with young people, who of-

"Preaching Bill or Man with Bowtie," by South Carolina folk artist Dan Robert Miller, made sometime between 1970 and 1987. Made of black gum wood. Miller was a truck driver who became ill and could not work. His creations were inspired by dreams. After each dream, he would go into the woods to find wood from which to make his carving. Museum purchase. Columbia Museum of Art. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.



Confrontation II, a 1964 painting by Merton D. Simpson. Note the differences between the two halves of the face. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

ten know little about art. He concentrates on ensuring that they understand the "context" of the art. By context he means the things around the artist that inspire and affect her creation. Goodwin has earned many awards, including U.S. Art Educator of the Year.

Jonathan Green, a Gardens Corner native now living in Florida, shows the richness of Southern African-American life in his paintings. His brightly-colored works show both the celebrations and everyday life among the Gullah. He has also co-authored a book entitled *Father and Son.* As a small child, Green lived with his grandparents in South Carolina and visited his mother, who had moved to New York, in the summers. In third grade, he moved to New York but returned South several years later. After finishing high school, he joined the military when he was told he would be trained as an artist. Instead, he was sent to North Dakota to train as a cook. Naturally, he was upset but all was not lost. The resourceful young man managed to find a nearby school where he could attend art classes each day after chef's school. Encouraged by his art teachers, he went to the Art Institute of Chicago after completing military service. He graduated in 1982 with a bachelor's degree. During his years in the Midwest, he began to think about his Lowcountry home, which became the subject of so much of his work. He is one of those who is helping to preserve Gullah culture through art.

Orangeburg native Floyd Gordon is a watercolor artist who paints landscapes, people, and abstracts. Much of his work focuses on everyday life of African-Americans. By the time he was six, he knew he wanted to be an artist. He achieved this goal after traveling widely and holding a number of different jobs. After high school, he attended Claflin College but soon dropped out. He moved to Washington State, then served with the Army in Germany in the 1960s. Later he lived in New York City. Gordon returned to Orangeburg and began a career as a freelance artist after four years in the North. Eventually, Gordon decided to complete his bachelor's degree in art and returned to Claflin College. He graduated in 1980. With his degree in hand, he began to display his work in shows in South Carolina. His work has appeared in shows all over the U.S. He has a gallery in Orangeburg.

Other modern artists include Winston Wingo, Leroy Marshall, Larry Lebby, and Tarleton Blackwell. Wingo is a sculptor. Marshall is a folk artist from Cherokee County, a paraplegic who creates by using the things people throw away. Lebby is a graphic artist living in Columbia, who has a piece of his work in the Smithsonian Collection. Tarleton Blackwell is a realist known for his work depicting images of hogs.

These and many others each in their own way portray the African-American experience.

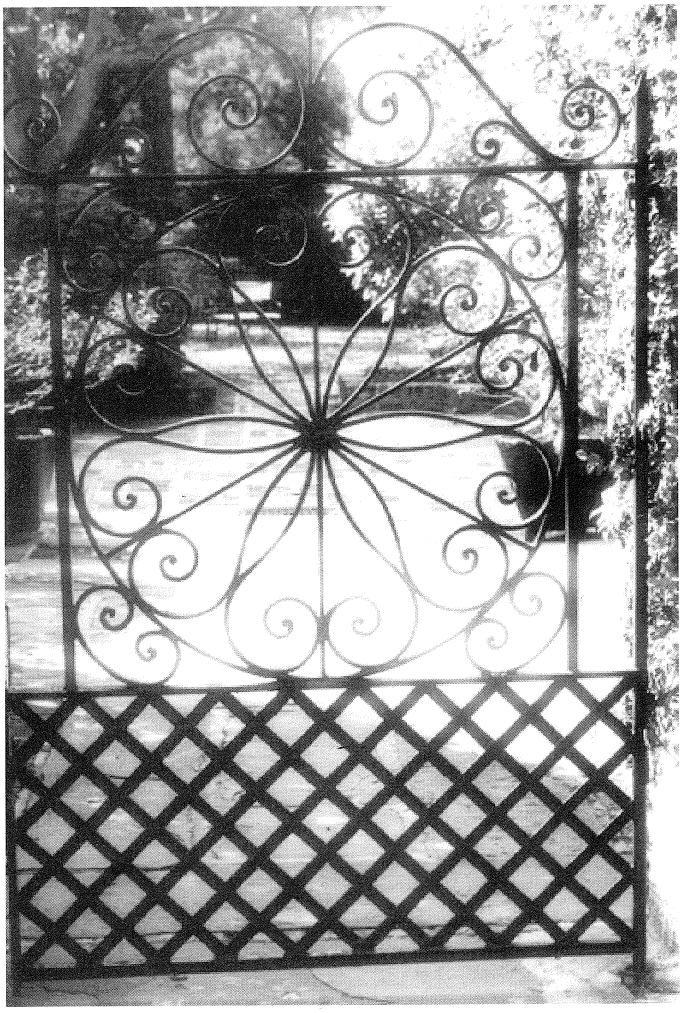
Philip Simmons: Master Ironworker

Ironwork represents a special kind of art. One very special ironworker lives in South Carolina. Philip Simmons of Daniel Island is famous for his ornamental ironwork. He carries on a long tradition. It began with the skills brought from Africa several hundred years ago. Generations of craftsmen carried it forward. A master craftsman, coincidentally also named Simmons, trained him. Philip Simmons has trained younger artisans who will carry the art forward. These include a younger member of the family of the master craftsman who originally trained Philip Simmons.

Born in Wando in 1912, Simmons' family moved to Charleston when he was a boy. As a child he watched his grandfather, a skilled carpenter, as he worked. He learned much of his craft by watching the blacksmiths at work. One of the blacksmiths trained him. Simmons earned a living at auto and truck repair in the 1920s and 1930s. Eventually, he began repairing and then making iron gates. His designs became more complex. In the next forty years, he produced over 200 gates. He made window grilles and fences as well. His work was in demand, and he was often asked to restore gates and iron railings. You can see much of his work outside of homes and buildings in historic Charleston.

The Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. honored Simmons as a National Heritage Fellow. He designed and crafted a "Star and Fish" wrought-iron gate for the Smithsonian to display. His eye was good enough to do the work without measuring. As one

(Left) Iron grillwork by Philip Simmons in Charleston. Note the detail of the bird in the center. This is as much art as craft. Photo by Aimee Smith. (Right) Another example of Philip Simmons iron grillwork in a garden gate. Photo by Aimee Smith.



journalist reported, the end result was "perfect."

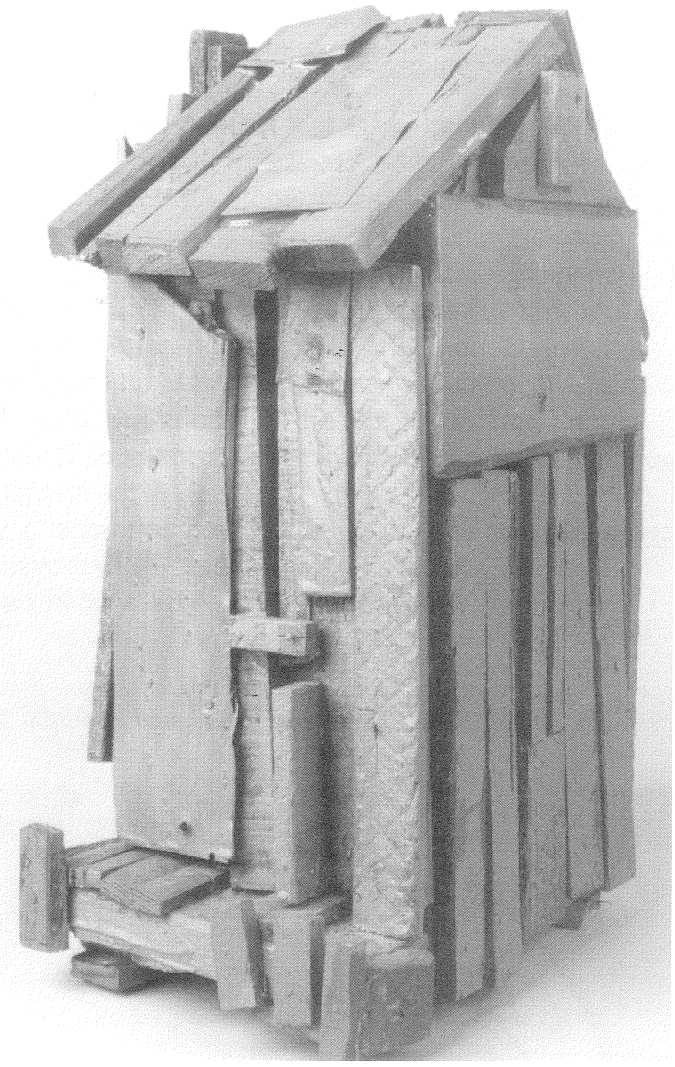
Simmons has also been inducted into the S.C. Hall of Fame, and the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment of the Arts has recognized his work. The State Museum in Columbia displays a fine example of his work. While he says that he thinks of himself as a blacksmith, he will be remembered as an artist.

Losses and Gains to South Carolina

Through much of the 1900s, the work of African-American artists was almost totally ignored. Exactly how much was lost is hard to tell. That there was a loss is illustrated by the case of Charles Spears. Born around 1901 in Sumter, he was disabled fighting in World War I. He must have been talented because his paintings were exhibited all over the nation and abroad. We know that they were part of the 1930 Harmon Foundation exhibit. Supposedly, he painted landscapes and used a primitive style, but we have no examples of his work to see. All have disappeared. Spears must be considered a "lost" artist, another victim of apathy that resulted from living in a segregated society that placed little value on the work of its African-American citizens.

White society has only recently begun to recognize the importance and quality of African-American art. However, even today art exhibits still show little of the work of female African-American artists. Beverly Buchanan is an exception. She is one of the very few women usually included in standard lists of African-American artists. Buchanan's work looks at the rural South. African-American women had to face a double dose of discrimination against any creative efforts. Both their race and their sex posed barriers to recognition and success.

Hopefully, younger African-American artists of both sexes will face fewer barriers as time goes on. We will almost surely see a huge range and wide variety of work in years to come. Perhaps more of those making contributions in the future will be able not only to call South Carolina their home, but keep it as their home.



"Frank Owens' Blue Shack," 1989, by Beverly Buchanan. Made of pine, tin, and acrylic paint. Museum purchase. Columbia Museum of Art. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina, organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.